

Imagine
a Man

Growing Up & Masculinities: A Space to Be!

RESEARCH REPORT 2025



~~No knives~~
Better lives

Growing Up & Masculinities: A Space to Be!

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Contents

What we did in partnership with Children's Workers	6
Meet the Youth Groups	8
What environment did the Children's Workers create for the 8-12 year olds?	10
How did the Children's Workers approach the work?	16
What did the young people learn?	22
How did the young people feel?	24
What were the young people's hopes for the future?	26
How did the young people find the sessions?	27
How was it received in the primary schools?	28
What next for the youth groups?	29
What did we learn?	30
Recommendations	31





About Us

Imagine a Man is a research and evidence-based development initiative designed to help boys and young men to develop a healthy and positive version of masculinity that aligns to gender equality.

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work in Scotland and runs the violence prevention programme **No Knives Better Lives**.

Why we chose to focus on 8–12-year-olds

Imagine a Man is a research and evidence-based development project run through the No Knives Better Lives team at YouthLink Scotland. Since 2020, Senior Development Worker Vicki and Senior Researcher Amy, have been working together to understand the experience of what it's like to be a boy or young man in Scotland. This has involved large surveys, focus groups and interviews with young people and practitioners and supporting young people to explore the issues themselves through youth-led research. Through this research, young people and practitioners told us that there is a need to change the narrative to stop focusing on 'toxic' masculinity and to instead provide a more hopeful narrative around 'positive' masculinity. The emerging evidence base has been used to develop training and resources for practitioners working directly with young people. These resources have been well received across Scotland and beyond, becoming embedded in schools and youth clubs, delivered by youth workers, teachers, police officers and other practitioners. The first 4 years focused on the 12 plus age range, with a particular focus on schools needing to explore masculinity through providing positive role models and brave spaces.

The feedback we received was that we needed to start the work much earlier. That by the time young people are in high school their ideas of gender already quite fixed and though we need to continue to work with them and provide alternative narratives, we also need to work with young people before adolescence.

What we did in partnership with Children's Workers

The success of the first 3 years of Imagine a Man has been largely down to the balance of research and evidence, informing the development of the resources and training. As such, we wanted to carry on with this approach in year 4.

We recognised that we are not the experts at working with primary school aged young people and so decided to recruit Children's Workers from 3 areas to work directly with 8-12 year olds. We did not specify that they had to work only with boys, recognising that girls and young people across the gender spectrum should also participate.

Children's workers from PEEK in Glasgow, Burnfoot Community School in the Scottish Borders and Big Hearts in Edinburgh were identified to take part. We decided to use a participatory research approach to explore positive masculinity with the 8-12 year olds.

The Children's Workers were all provided with copies of the Imagine a Man toolkit and access to the online training. Vicki also provided direct training to the workers in the background to the toolkit and a selection of the activities. We asked the workers in the 3 areas, to use and adapt the toolkit for the young age group over a 6-8 week period, working with the young people on a weekly basis.

To understand the process and impact of these sessions with the 8-12 years, Amy provided research training to the workers to enable them to run focus groups with the young people before and after the period of intervention.



The questions in the first focus group focused on the young people's understanding of masculinity and positive masculinity. They were also asked about the role models they look up to, the relationships they rely on when they're feeling worried and what kind of man they want to be in the future. The second focus group explored how their understanding of positive masculinity might have changed as a result of the programme and how they found taking part in the activities. Creative methods were suggested to help engage the young people in the focus groups, but the workers had freedom to run these in a way that met the needs of the group.

The young people and their parents/guardians were provided with an information sheet and consent form to take part in the focus groups. The focus groups were audio recorded and securely saved and transcribed. The Children's Workers attended a reflection day in Edinburgh in November 2024, where they were facilitated and supported to reflect on the key themes that emerged from the focus groups as well as their experiences of working with the young people. These reflections were recorded and have been used as part of writing this report and the development of a toolkit for practitioners working with 8-12 year olds on the theme of positive masculinity.

Meet the Youth Groups



Masculinity through the lens of...
Football

T.E.A.M Project with Big Hearts Community Trust

Tynecastle Football Stadium,
Edinburgh

Big Hearts Community Trust are the official charity of the Heart of Midlothian FC. A male and female Children's Workers worked with 3 girls and 11 boys all aged 8-12 years. The young people were chosen because they have been attending a project at Big Hearts called Together Equality Achieves More (T.E.A.M) for children of New Scots, asylum seeking and refugee families who are settling into life in Scotland. T.E.A.M is also a programme to provide free childcare and support to parents in the south west locality who need it most. This led to a multi-cultural group including young people from Ukraine, Portuguese, Nigeria, Nepal, Morocco, Sudan and Scotland.



Masculinity through the lens of...

Play

Possibilities for Each and Every Kid (PEEK)

Glasgow

PEEK supports young people through play and creative learning. Two male play workers worked with eleven 8-11 year old boys in a primary school in Glasgow. The young people were growing up in a sectarian area and were a multicultural group including Scots, Muslim, African and Polish. The young people were chosen to attend the group by the teachers, based on their behaviour in school and family circumstances.



Masculinity through the lens of...

Community Learning & Development

Burnfoot Community School

Scottish Borders

Two female Community Learning and Development Workers worked with six 11 years old boys in a primary school in the Borders. There was also a school police officer who attended the sessions as a means of improving police and community relationships. The young people lived in the most deprived community in the Borders and were in receipt of free school meals. The boys were chosen by the Headteacher to take part due to their behaviour.

What environment did the Children's Workers create for the 8-12 year olds?

The Children's Workers were chosen due to their wealth of experience working with 8-12 year olds. They were tasked with delivering Imagine a Man in a fun, creative, accessible way which was appropriate for the age of the young people taking part. To do this, they created space for the young people to explore positive masculinity.



A space to... Be With Others

Though some of the young people knew each other, each of the groups were formed specifically for Imagine a Man. This meant that the Children's Workers needed to create a space for the young people to get to know each other and trust each other, as well as the workers. This also included bringing young people together from different backgrounds and nationalities.

"There's a really interesting mix of nationalities and gender as well, there's boys and girls, it's not necessarily just boys but the interesting part for us when we first took on this was figuring out the difference in answers and opinions and biases from different nations and different cultures and religions and backgrounds whatever and seeing how they merged up and learning a bit about them as much as we were trying to teach them something" (Children's Worker, 3)

A space to Be Safe

In each of the groups the young people, particularly in the boys groups started to open up and to share their experiences. Sometimes these experiences brought up emotions for the boys as well as helping the Children's Workers to understand what was going on for them, particularly at home. They created a space where they felt safe to share.

"We've had one wee boy in particular is going through a really rough time just now with family. He's been there every single week; he's not missed a week and just started to really talk to us and open up a little bit about things" (Children's Worker, 2)

"A safe space for them and like anyone who wanted to talk about things like, there's no wrong answer. And just making sure everyone felt comfortable. What it's like if you have a comfortable, safe space, that's where the magic happens" (Children's Worker, 1)

A space to Be Happy

The Imagine a Man team visited each of the groups, a key reflection was the joy that had been created in the groups. Though focusing on challenging themes, the Children's Workers were all skilled at providing time for fun, games, crafts, singing - a space to be happy.

"I noticed that about your group in particular because it was more recent but all the groups, at that age they seem very kind and very unguarded and quite disinhibited. You should have heard them singing Last Christmas by Wham, I was really surprised they knew all the lyrics and actually were confident enough and disinhibited enough and happy enough, there was a happiness there about the way they sang that"

(Imagine a Man lead)

A space to Be Active and Have fun

An important aspect for each group in both a school and youth work setting was to provide space for the young people to be active and have fun. This was particularly important for the younger age group. At points this included moving the tables and providing the physical space for the young people to move and be playful.

"We had a boisterous bunch of young kids that were...we knew when we did it or when we were going to do it that the first thing they were going to do they would be all over the place. So we were a bit like right get the tables out of the way. Get a big space, a big area because we know they're going to move quite a bit" **(Children's Worker, 3)**

A space to Be Looked After and Treated

Being nurtured was not a given for all of the young people taking part. Part of the approach by the Children's Workers was to help the boys feel cared for, to be looked after and to be treated. They kept their promises to the boys and as a consequence they became trusted adults.

"We had a celebration day yesterday and got pizzas and we did cupcakes for them, and I have never in my life seen kids eat like this. I was shook like...I was like...they've just had lunch. She was like I know but this is a complete luxury for them to get these Haribo sweets and pizzas and stuff" **(Children's Worker, 2)**

A space to Be Celebrated

Not all of the young people felt they had adults in their lives that were interested in what they did in school. Through building relationships and trust with the young people, allowed the boys to open up about this, which meant the Children's Workers responded and provided that space to celebrate the boys and their achievements within the programme.

"We did certificates for them and our manager came in and the Head Teacher of the school and done like a presentation for them, you've completed Imagine A Man and my manager was like shaking all their hands and just took photos and made a real big deal out of it because it's a huge achievement for them to even start and finish a programme" **(Children's Worker, 2)**

A space to Explore Role Models

As part of the sessions, the Children's Workers explored the concept of role models with the young people. This discussion often led to them being seen as role models by the young people, as they were viewed as trusted adults.

"The way we done the role model thing and a lot of them put us is their role models like above parents....And like above teachers and stuff. And that was very sweet and nice. I guess a wee bit emotional" **(Children's Worker, 1)**

A space to Explore Identities

Through providing a safe space also provided the young people with a brave space to explore different identities and test their thoughts with their peers.

"What was the other activity draw a man?... Yeah he's a YouTuber that was it as well and a rapper and a gangster as well but there was this one really interesting bit as well where there was a wee boy, he's from the Ukraine and there was maybe like 7 or 8 of them around it and then he goes...he went wait and everything went dead silent and we were like what, he went well what happens if he's gay and honestly you could hear a pin drop and I was like...they were like oh I don't know. I don't know and then they went it doesn't really matter if he's gay... I think you know to bring that up and things like that, it's really good that they've got an understanding that it doesn't matter. So it was...and that was like all different nationalities so I found that bit really really interesting" **(Children's Worker, 3)**

A space to Accept Each Other's Differences

It was an interesting reflection in one of the groups, that though the boys had different beliefs and allegiances through football which effected relationships outside of the group, inside the group they seemed to form a bond and found a way to "talk to each other".

"They kind of get on with their life but they will have their instincts or they will have the instinctive answers of like that's Rangers, that's Celtic. Like even...there are 2 boys that don't really get along 'outside the class and don't get me wrong, they do butt heads quite often but there will be sessions that they're fine and they will talk to each other..."

No, they just don't get along, I don't know what the reason is, the teachers have said whatever they're doing they will just find ways to annoy each other. They've just got that kind of connection with each other; they just annoy each other but the session has helped them" **(Children's Worker, 1)**

A space to Be Brave

By providing all of the different kinds of spaces for the young people to explore positive masculinity created the conditions for the young people to feel brave and share their feelings and concerns. Brave spaces was a concept explored in year 2 of Imagine a Man by older young people who discussed feeling brave to challenge each other and have uncomfortable discussions. For the younger boys, bravery was in sharing their feelings and emotions with each other and their workers.

"The group that we've been working with they've all...I've been really shocked at how forward they've been and how much they've wanted to talk about their feelings and talk about role models and the choices that they want to make in life and it's been really refreshing for us to see that and see the steps that they want to take" **(Children's Worker, 2)**

How did the Children's Workers approach the work?

Worked with a targeted group

In the two boys groups the young people were selected to take part by their Headteachers because of their behaviour. From the Children's Workers perspective this ensured that the young people taking part would really benefit from the programme.

"Yeah, they are very lively and that's it like and I think because the school picked these this group as well... Like it wasn't like we never had selected anyone. It was like they were picking people who they think would benefit the most from this. And I think yeah, as you can see, it was lively". (Children's Worker, 1)



Built respect through play

Play was an important element of the sessions with the younger boys, where games and activities were used to provide a space to be happy and build connections. An important element of the sessions was also about building respect between the young people and the workers but also between the young people, through listening to each other.

"We don't always play games because...the times when you's came doon...we try and use it as like a reward but as a respect thing of like if we get stuff done we'll play games but see if we cannae like just switch on, no' even switch on but even just talk to each other and be civil with each other, you'll just no' get games and stuff as well because...it's just trying to have that...trying to build respect between each other, it's not even like respecting me and [Children's Worker], you's need to respect each other. You's cannae call out each other and stuff, you cannae expect people to just agree with you all the time or give you what you want. You just need to come to a conclusion with each other"
(Children's Worker, 1)

Supported boys to talk

Through play and creativity the Children's Workers created a safe environment for the young people. This space led the young people to start to open and share their feelings and experiences with each other.

"That's been from the very first session, we'll talk about anything, if its bad/good we'll talk about anything and we'll have a chat about it and we'll talk about why it's maybe seen as no you can't say these kinds of things or like why people might be offended by it. I just thought that was really nice"
(Children's Worker, 1)

"I was so surprised, they literally sat around the table and just had an open discussion. I think it's because of the size of our group"
(Children's Worker, 2)

Encouraged boys to hug boys

In the boys only groups, the boys were encouraged to listen to each other and important part of this was responding when they shared something that was upsetting them. The Children's Workers encouraged them to show emotion and to hug each other.

"[Children's Worker] is big on boys hug boys since the first session, he's like we can hug boys and they've actually been fine with it as well"

(Children's Worker, 1)

Provided small group opportunities

An important reflection was for the younger age group, the size of the group mattered. There was a time and space for larger groups encouraging fun, but to have space to talk, listen and reflect it was crucial to have time in smaller groups.

"Some of the feedback we were getting as well was the boys felt like they could talk more in a smaller group. There was things they said they would never have discussed in their classroom or in a bigger group and they felt comfortable to express it in a smaller group"

(Children's Worker, 2)

Set clear expectations and boundaries

The 8-12 year old age group responded well to clear expectations and boundaries, this also helped to build trust with the workers.

"So it's like I have to basically...at that age I have to tell them exactly what's happening. Like when we're sitting down it's like right okay so we're going to get our snack sorted, what do you's want and then this is what's happening, this is what's next happening and this is what's next happening or they won't get it"

(Children's Worker, 2)

Adapted to the needs of the young people

The Children's Workers were very skilled at adapting the sessions to the needs of the group. This meant getting to know the interests and needs of the young people. For example, not all young people like drawing or being creative, so the workers would find ways to engage them in the session by meeting their needs.

"We actually noticed that so when we done the community mapping exercise we printed out like photos of a park, photos of the school, so that they could do...stick stuff down but also just write or draw if they wanted to in the gaps. So we found that was a bit more better for them but it's just figuring out your group and I think that's Community Learning and Development, Youth Work to an absolute tee is you've got to wing it, you've got to kind of act on the spot and develop what you're doing based on the group and no group is going to be the same so you're going to have to change it up in the middle of it"

(Children's Worker, 2)

"It was a difficult in a sense of we just had to change it all the time like we would go in there with a plan and maybe we have like 3 points we were going to touch upon in that session and maybe we'll get through one. And it was just making sure [we] were adaptable and things that we did miss, we were just picking it back up the week after"

(Children's Worker, 1)

"I just I think it was also like just acknowledging it and saying that was really nice. Like what you did there and giving them like a wee bit of like, well done by the way. Like that's that's a really nice thing that you're doing is giving them a hug and putting them and like, just making sure they know that you feel alright and that"

(Children's Worker, 1)

Used visual methods

The experience of the Children's Workers meant that they knew the tools that worked well for the 8-12 year old age range. One of the tools was using visual methods to encourage discussion.

"Like visual stuff I always think for that kind of age group is quite good as well do you know what I mean, like works quite well. Like a picture of some sort and like getting them to discuss that picture, what it means to them or what can you see, things like that, that works quite well"

(Children's Worker, 2)

Learning through football

For the group based at Big Hearts, part of the excitement about being part of the group was being based at the stadium and having an opportunity to play football. During these sessions the Children's Workers provided time for the Imagine a Man programme as well as time to play football together.

"That's why we did that because we were like the guys that we have predominantly love football and that's what they come for, they're no' signed up, they're referred by the teacher or parent but they're no' interested in the details or the finer details, you try and get the bits 'n' pieces that you need to across to them really slowly and in small amounts, make it as fun as possible and dinnae spend the whole hour doing a cultural exchange thing, they're just going to go what is this?"

(Children's Worker, 3)



What did the young people learn?

About masculinity

Before the programme the young people were asked if they had heard of 'masculinity', the majority had not. Here is an interaction between the Children's Worker and the young people which provides a flavour of their understanding:

- YP** *"I heard about it at school once"*
- Children's worker** *"Okay in school you've heard about it okay, what do you think it means?"*
- YP** *"No idea"*
- YP** *"Doesn't masculinity just mean like boys and that"*
- YP** *"Yeah"*
- YP** *"Like men"*
- YP** *"Basically the same thing he said"*
- YP** *"Or is masculine like a different word, like I don't know. That's all I know about it"*

(Children's Group 3)

After the programme, the young people were able to share words that they associated with masculinity "muscle", "strength", being "happy", "sport", "hard working", "taller", being "hard", "being strong", "gentleman" and "being kind".



About positive masculinity

As masculinity was an unfamiliar concept to many of the young people, understandably so was positive masculinity. With a little support from their Children's Workers to language more easily understood such as 'good masculinity' the young people could associate being "strong, kind", "caring" and "helpful" as positive masculine traits. For some of the young people even after the programme the concept of 'positive masculinity' was not easily understood "What is it again?" but again with prompts and support they could share it's about "being a good man", "being an awesome man".

One of the Children's Workers also reflected on the language:

"[A good man]... That terms perfect, I think that's exactly what they would always turn back to that. Like what makes a good man? Like good and stuff like that. That's words that resonate with these kids a lot"

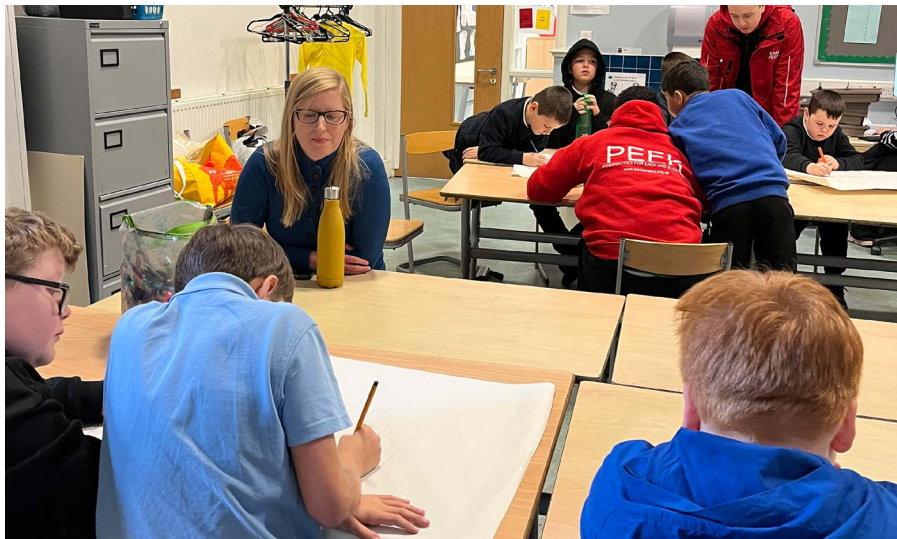
(Children's Worker, 1)

How did the young people feel?

About being a man

The young people had a really mixed view of what it's like to be a man. Before the programme some young people discussed the physicality of being a man "you're more grown", "deeper voice", there was also discussion about the responsibilities "you've got a responsibility to do when you're a man, you can't break the law or something like that" and "you have to take care of the whole family".

The view of being a man did not improve after the programme instead being a man was described as "hard", "expensive" and "you have to go a house, you have to get a job".



About being a boy

There was also a mixed picture about what it's like to be a boy which didn't seem to change much as a result of the programme. For those who thought it was "difficult" before the programme, they thought it was "annoying" after. This was explained by one young person "it's quite difficult... say like you've got a girlfriend, all they do is nip in your ear". Equally for those who thought it "it's fun", "playing football" they still seemed to find it's "its very fun, very fun" after.

About role models

Many of the young people looked up to their families – Mums, Dads, Nans, Sisters, Brothers and these are the same people they would turn to if they were worried and needed advice "my parents like figure out like how to make a situation better". Their Children's Workers are also seen as a source of support and care "Big Hearts... they take care of us... and we have fun".

The young people shared the attributes that made a good role model including "honesty", "loyal to like other people" and "they are so kind to everyone".

About what makes a good friend

Being a good friend was important to the young people and they could easily list what made someone a good friend - "honesty", "trust", "there for you", "kind", "caring", "helpful", "respectful", "someone that is nice to you."

What were the young people's hopes for the future?

Before the programme, the young people shared that they hoped to become footballers, rugby players, basketball players, farmers, police officers, joiners, businessmen, accountants and pilots. For the most part these are gendered roles that they aspired to be when they were men. After the programme they appeared to be more reflective and though they didn't share the jobs they aspired to have they did share the kind of men they wanted to be: "fit, positive, speaking out", "healthy", "helpful", "a kind man", "a strong man", "very generous" and "a gentleman".



How did the young people find the sessions?

The young people described the programme as "good", "amazing", "fun" and "active". The young people from one of the groups shared that they had learned about "positivity", "for men to speak out", "for boys to speak out" and that "boys and girls that should get treated the same". But, these were the same young people who said they had not shared what they had learned with their families, it seemed because they didn't think they would be interested. For young people from other groups, they did share what they had learned "I told them that I learnt how to be a good man".

There appeared to be a general agreement that it is important to learn about positive masculinity "yeah because then you'll be positive when you're older" and "yeah...it just is".



How was it received in the primary schools?

The programme took place in two primary schools.

One of the Headteachers shared with us that they had wanted the programme to take place in their school “to dispel the stereotypical image of men and encourage positive, aspirational thinking as to what a male role model is”. They had chosen the boys to take part who were “displaying stereotypical male behaviours” and thought it was acceptable. As a result of the programme, the Headteacher shared:

“We have seen some very insightful behaviours from the boys involved. Some are more willing to discuss their emotions and have their ideas and perceptions supported but also challenged in a positive manner. This has been interesting to observe, and we are now seeing one boy displaying improved confidence and self-belief as he feels that he will be listened to and taken seriously.

They are also more understanding of gender stereotypes and show greater empathy towards certain peers who are experiencing more challenging times. We have also seen greater respect for themselves and for others in school. This has been particularly apparent when I have observed social situations where the environment is less structured and there is less supervision of our young people”

The programme has also improved relationships with the police as a school officer attended the sessions. It was seen by the Headteacher as a “privilege” to see this change in the relationship, particularly as “perceptions of the police can be extremely negative in our community, particularly amongst males”. This school is looking to extend their knowledge and identify a similar programme for girls.

What next for the youth groups?

The Scottish Borders Council are going to continue with Imagine a Man and after interest from other schools, extend the offer to other schools to help with the transition from primary to high school.

PEEK are looking to extend the programme in the school through the Family Wellbeing Workers.



What did we learn?

We decided to run this programme because we wanted to address concerns that positive masculinity work needed to take place with younger children, particularly before the transition to high school. What we learned is that 'positive masculinity' is not an easily understood concept for the 8-12 year old age range. Instead the idea of being a 'good man' felt much more accessible.

Working with this age group had it's challenges, whereas the work with 13 plus, has been in-depth and reflective, the work with younger children needed to be different, creative, fun and at a slower pace, their pace. This meant that though all of the games, crafts and activities were on the theme of 'positive masculinity' they didn't always use this language. This is okay. A key learning is that more subtle messaging around role models, friendships, being good and kind, all support young people to reflect on what it is to be a 'good man'. For all of the groups they would have wanted the programme to last longer. Typically the sessions were weekly for 6-8 weeks, but in truth this is not long enough. To aspire to make long lasting change in how young people view and perform positive masculinity the programme would need to last for months and years not weeks. Ideally it would be part of their learning in primary school and continue in their transition to high school.

Another key learning is the importance of providing a space for boys. This is not to say that girls should not be part of this work. But, for two of the groups that were all boys, the reflections from the Children's Workers was that the boys benefitted from having a space just for them. In having this space, they were more comfortable to open up, to show vulnerability, to hug their friends and workers as well as be silly, sing and have fun. This work also seemed to work best when the boys had an opportunity to work in smaller groups. This provided more opportunity for thoughtful reflections. **A space for young people to be themselves.**

Recommendations

- Consider providing **boys only spaces to explore masculinity**
- It is important to **provide opportunities for smaller group work to help boys open up**
- **This work requires funding and resources for longer term work –** this work needs to happen over months and years not just weeks
- Consider **using the language of a 'good man'** when working with a younger age group
- **Play, games and creativity are essential** to supporting younger people to explore masculinity and have reflective conversations



**Many thanks to all
those who took part
in the research and
contributed
to this resource**

**Imagine
a Man**

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